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Facts and Life: Osip Brik in the Soviet Film Industry

Alastair Renfrew

ABSTRACT

Of the former members of OPOIAZ who became involved in the cinema in the mid-1920s, Osip Brik pursued the most radical theoretical programme, ultimately arguing for the primacy of ‘material’ – or *fact* – over invention. This partially aligned him with other members of LEF engaged in the cinema, such as Sergei Tret'iakov, and with the broad avant-garde preference for documentary over ‘played’ film. Brik also briefly occupied a significant position in the creative administration of the Mezhrabpom studio and, although many of his scripts remained unfilmed, two significant examples were produced in the late 1920s – *Storm over Asia/Potomok Chingis-Khana* (Pudovkin, 1929) and *2-Bul'di-2* (Kuleshov and Agadzhanova, 1929/1930). The production histories of these films painfully demonstrate the contradictions between Brik's theoretical and polemical writings and the practical realities of the film industry. They also form a platform for a broader examination of the contradictions inherent in LEF film theory, as well as the contradictions that remained – both for Brik and more generally – after the debate around *kino fakta* had been curtailed by accelerating shifts in the political and ideological climate as the 1930s dawned.

KEYWORDS

Formalism – LEF – *Kino fakta* – Mezhrabpom

Art needs advances, not victories.

— Viktor Shklovskii¹

The focus on literary specificity in the early work of the so-called Russian Formalists may at first glance seem an unlikely preparation for the substantial involvement with the cinema of three of the leading representatives of that imperfect ‘movement’, Viktor Shklovskii, Iurii

Tynianov, and Osip Brik. From the opposite perspective, however, the notion of the specificity of literature can be seen as perfectly complementary – or even logically productive of – a theoretical commitment to the specificity of *film*. Although all three came to the cinema as part of what became known as the ‘Literary Campaign’ of 1925,² their ‘Formalist’ credentials insulated them from what the cinematic avant-garde regarded, with some justification, as the key threat to the emergence of cinema as an autonomous art form – its reduction, often through the simple mechanism of adaptation (*ekranizatsiia*), to pre-existent aesthetic models inherited from literature and the theatre (‘O kinematografe’, Shklovskii 1985: 14–16).

We should nonetheless remain cautious with regard to a putative ‘Formalist theory of film’, for two broad reasons. First, the writings on cinema of the major Formalists varied to such a degree that there is little to be gained in seeking any kind of generalised conclusion about the Formalists (in the cinema) as a ‘group’. Only Tynianov, in fact, can be said to have offered anything approaching a systematic *theory* of film, in contrast to the occasional, publicistic and often polemical character of the contributions of Shklovskii and Brik, which therefore tended to shift with the passage of time and changes of circumstance.³ We will, however, assess the specifically theoretical implications of Brik’s contribution in much of what follows. The second reason for caution is at once more general and more compelling: rather than the variegated nature of Formalist ‘theory’ of cinema contradicting a supposed literary-theoretical unity, we might view it as consistent with and predictive of a similar diversity in their theoretical positions on literature, a diversity that has been under-estimated by contemporaries and later interpreters alike (albeit for very different reasons).⁴

When we turn to the nature of each individual’s practical involvement in the cinema, this diversity becomes, if anything, even more marked. Shklovskii, for example, was at one point so ubiquitous in the film industry, and his involvement maintained over such a considerable period, that a book-length study would be required to do anything like justice to the subject.⁵ Tynianov’s contribution to the cinema is much more concentrated, in that the small number of films made from his screenplays were all produced or conceived in the relatively homogeneous period between the 1925 Literary campaign and the onset of ‘cultural revolution’, the same period in which his film writings appeared.⁶ By way of contrast, Brik’s film output is less well known than that of his colleagues and, with the exception of his co-authored screenplay for Vsevolod Pudovkin’s *Potomok Chingis-Khana/Storm over Asia* (1928), he produced nothing to match Tynianov’s scripts for *Shinel/The Overcoat* (Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, 1926), *S.V.D. [Soiuz velikogo dela/The Club of the Great*

Deed (Kozintsev and Trauberg, 1929; co-written with Iulian Oksman) and *Poruchik Kizhe/Lieutenant Kizhe* (aka *The Tsar Wants to Sleep*, Aleksandr Faintsimmer, 1934); or Shklovskii's for *Kryl'ia kholopa/The Wings of a Serf* (Iurii Tarich, 1926), *Po zakonu/By the Law* (Lev Kuleshov, 1926), *Tret'ia meshchanskaia/Bed and Sofa* (Abram Room, 1927), *Dom na Trubnoi/The House on Trubnaya Square* (Boris Barnet, 1928), *Gorizont* (Kuleshov, 1932) and *Mertvyi dom/House of the Dead* (Vasilii Fedorov, 1932) (although it should also be acknowledged that a number of Shklovskii's credits are as co-author).

There are nonetheless at least two reasons to suppose that Brik might have been, if not the most notable of the 'Formalists in film', then at least the most indicative: first, because he provides the most stark, and in some ways perplexing, specific answer to the general question of the relationship between a putative theory of cinema and film practice. The relationship between Brik's film work and his theoretical writing was, as we will presently see, inconsistent to the point of being contradictory. Second, Brik was the closest the erstwhile Formalist contingent had to an 'establishment' figure, partly because of his association with Maiakovskii and consequent position of some authority in *LEF*, partly also because of his brief tenure as Head of the Script Department [*Litotdel*] at the Mezhrabpom studio; his traverse of the Soviet film industry through the late 1920s and 1930s therefore provides far greater representative insights into its workings than is the case with the eminently cautious Tynianov, who had effectively left the cinema before the 1930s dawned, or the mercurial, idiosyncratic Shklovskii, who might more properly be regarded as 'representative' of nothing.

From *Opoiāz* to *literatura (kino) fakta*

Brik was both a central and peripheral figure in *Opoiāz* [*Obshchestvo po poeticheskomu iazyku*, The Society for the Study of Poetic Language]. On one hand, he was a founder member, publisher of the group's *Sborniki po poeticheskomu iazyku*, and, perhaps most significantly, author of 'Sound Repetitions' ('Zvukovye povtory', Brik 1917: 24–62). First published in 1917, 'Sound Repetitions' is a seminal contribution to the theory of an autonomous poetic language, the analytical prosodic counterpart to Shklovskii's more metaphorical 'Resurrection of the Word' ('Voskreshenie slova' 1914) and Roman Jakobson's all-encompassing definition of poetry as 'language in its aesthetic function' (Shklovskii 1990: 36–42; Jakobson 1979: 299–354). On the other hand, Brik can be said to be peripheral to the development of *Opoiāz* or the 'formal method' in general, not only because his own work doesn't develop in parallel with that of his colleagues – 'Sound Repetitions' is developed in a

very particular manner, in circumstances to which we will return, only in 1927 –, but also because of the circumstances of his personal life. Long before the effective demise of *Opoiaz* in 1922, occasioned by Shklovskii's abrupt departure across the ice to Finland for the very real fear of becoming embroiled in the case of the right-wing Social Revolutionaries (SR) who were tried – and convicted – in June of that year,⁷ Brik had already distanced himself in the most literal sense, relocating to Moscow in early 1919 with his wife Lily and Vladimir Maiakovskii in response to the transfer of Soviet power from Petrograd to Moscow in the previous year. While Maiakovskii (and Lily) famously helped make ends meet during this period by writing slogans for various government agencies, including the 'Satirical Windows' [*Okna satiry*] series of ROST [*Rossiiskoe telegrafnoe agentstvo*], it is also worth noting that one of Brik's auxiliary forms of paid work between 1920 and 1924, aside from his prodigious publicistic output, was acting as a legal advisor to various incarnations of the GPU [*Gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*, Special Police Force] – a factor that has undoubtedly over-shadowed all subsequent consideration of his legacy, as well as giving a new shade of meaning to his 'peripheral' status among the post-revolutionary cultural intelligentsia ('R. O. Iakobson ob O. M. Brike' in Markelova 2010: 567–68). This is, at the very least, dramatic confirmation of what might delicately be termed Brik's 'institutional' disposition, which manifests itself in his repeated attempts to fashion a unified platform for the promotion of cultural and theoretical interests across the ostensible gulf between Bolshevism and Futurism, culminating in the establishment of LEF [*Levyi front iskusstva*] as a more promising 'successor' to *Opoiaz*.

Further, and crucially, it is important to emphasize that Brik comes to *LEF* not as a 'Formalist', but as a displaced Formalist and fellow traveller to the remnants of Futurism, who implicitly announces himself in LEF as a 'Constructivist-Productionist' [*konstruktivist-proizvodstvennik*]; following Aleksandr Rodchenko, Brik commits himself to the pre-eminence of production in the creation of a 'material culture'.⁸ This self-conscious going beyond Formalism is consistent with the fact that although Shklovskii, on his return from exile, will prefer LEF to the possible resurrection of *Opoiaz* – at least on a public, professional basis – his former Formalist colleagues are initially absent from its journal, until in 1924 Brik commissions articles by Tynianov, Eikhenbaum, Lev Iakubinskii, Boris Tomashevskii and Boris Kazanskii for an edition of the journal containing a number of articles devoted to Lenin's language.⁹

The question of the extent to which Brik seriously pursues Productionism in the cinema, in the terms with which he extols Rodchenko, 'not only in words, but in deeds' (Brik

1923b: 105), is problematized by the time lag between this initial statement of intent and both his debut as a screenwriter and an extended discussion of the theory of cinema in LEF's resurrected journal. Originally entitled simply *Lef*, the journal ceased publication at the beginning of 1925 after only seven issues, and re-commences under the title *Novyi Lef* only in 1927, after Maiakovskii's wanderings through 1925 and 1926 come to a temporary end. The launch of *Novyi Lef* and its subsequent orientation exposes two significant contradictions in Brik, each of which is characteristic of his fervent – yet at the same time flexible – attraction to the doctrinaire. The first of these concerns poetry, while the second concerns the literary tendency that will displace both poetry and 'Productionism' as such in Brik's affections, and will bring us back to film.

Long after the other Formalists had sought to de-emphasise their original notion of the absolute specificity of 'poetic language' (see Jakobson 1969; Tynianov 1963), and ten years after the first publication of 'Sound Repetitions', Brik persisted in the pages of *Novyi Lef* with a closed and severe form of prosodic formalism in his 'Rhythm and Syntax' ('Ritm i sintaksis').¹⁰ The justification for this approach is no longer, however, the high-minded commitment to a concept of literariness, but rather the perceived need to *instruct* the proletarian writer in the techniques of poetry. It is tempting to conclude that iconoclasm and idealism have given way entirely to didacticism. More importantly, however, the orientation of the later piece is consistent also with the idea of *sotsial'nyi zakaz*, which not only defined the role of the artist in terms of class consciousness, but also implied a deterministic view of art itself: the artistic work is a product of the social and ideological context in which it is produced, its formal dimension responding to the function that context imputes to it. Hence, perhaps, why the insistent author of 'Rhythm and Syntax' could nonetheless appear at a public meeting in early 1929 to read a paper entitled 'To Hell with Poetry' ('Na chorta nam stikhi', Valiuzhenich 1993: 28): poetry as a mode might remain a significant vehicle for burgeoning proletarian expression and, marginally, for agitational purposes; but it was, for Brik, no longer adequate to the imperatives of the various planks of the theoretical platform of *Novyi Lef* – production art and the so-called *literatura fakta*.¹¹

It would be wrong and misleading, however, to impute an entirely pragmatic motivation to the peripeties of Brik's thought and action. As Masha Enzensberger has pointed out, *sotsial'nyi zakaz* in some form had been a significant and consistent factor in Brik's thinking at least since the 1918 article 'The Drainage of Art' ('Drenazh iskusstvu', Brik 1918a).¹² Enzensberger is even willing to argue that, amid the theoretical and tactical evolutions of various Formalist positions through the 1920s, Brik is the most successful – and

consistent – in developing the original insights of Formalism in ways that were not simply non-contradictory to production art, which is imbricated in and/or product of the idea of *sotsial'nyi zakaz*. More than that, he in fact *derives* his conception of *sotsial'nyi zakaz* and production art from Formalist principles, from his enduring commitment to the mutual dependency of form and content and the definitive specificity of different kinds of artistic material, which *determines* the particular organic functionalism that is transgredient to all of these tendencies in Brik's understanding of them.

The extent to which this tendency has become central to Brik's work as the decade unfolds is confirmed by his contributions to *Novyi Lef*; two articles in particular, 'Closer to Fact' ('Blizhe k faktu', 1927) and 'The Decomposition of *siuzhet*' ('Razlozhenie siuzheta', 1929), not only dramatize this evolution, but also form a bridge to the specific question of *literatura fakta* and its significance for debates on the cinema.¹³ At first glance, both articles seem to embody the strident militancy of what Futurism had become, rejecting the aesthetics of the past in favour of an art in which the artist has become both worker and hyper-realist, overcoming the 'alienation from all practical work' of the Russian intelligentsia, its tendency 'to relate to facts as if they were invention' through an art and culture grounded in an over-determined, tautological 'real reality' (*real'naia deistvitel'nost'*; Brik 1927b). A purely tactical fusion of proletarian and quasi-Futurist militancy cannot, however, provide a theoretical – as opposed to polemical – basis for an alternative; for that, Brik not so surreptitiously turns to a 'classical' Formalist proposition, namely the distinction between *fabula* and *siuzhet*, most usefully defined in Shklovskii's essay on *Don Quixote* (Shklovskii 1929).¹⁴ Where Shklovskii has earlier located literariness in the processes and techniques by which *fabula* becomes *siuzhet*, Brik's focus now turns, with characteristic logical insistence, to the implications of this process for the *material* of the literary work, the extrinsic or 'found' object from which content is formed. In literary (prose) works where the dominant is *siuzhetnost*, the material, such as 'everyday detail', is definitively secondary; more, all 'plot constructions inevitably violate [*nasiluet*] the material', *deforming* [*iskazhaet*] what is selected in the name of narrative coherence (Brik 1929 in Chuzhak 2000: 226, 227). Now, however, in conditions of the new Soviet reality:

People will not allow *siuzhet* to distort [*kalechit'*] real material, they demand that real material be given to them in its original form (Brik 1929 in Chuzhak 2000: 227).

Quite apart from the extraordinary violence of Brik's language, it is clear that *literatura fakta* seeks to eliminate all distance between *fabula* and *siuzhet*, to raise material up as the first principle of literary 'creation', to render life as it is 'found', and in fact to do away almost entirely with the idea of *siuzhet*:

The contemporary consumer [*potrebitel'*] regards the artistic work not as a value, but as a means, as a method for the communication of real material. Where earlier the artistic work was primary, and the material was no more than necessary raw material [*syr'e*], now the relationship has changed radically. The material itself is primary, and the artistic work is merely one of many possible means of its concretization [...] (Brik 1929 in Chuzhak 2000: 228).

Whether in the very different forms of the newspaper article or the 'plotless' or 'non-narrative' [*bessiuzhetnyi*] memoir-novel favoured (and produced) by Shklovskii (Shklovskii 1923a; Shklovsky 1970), the presentation or 'concretization' of 'real material' comes to represent the highest instance of the unity of form and content.

Brik begins by speaking about literature, then specifies 'siuzhetnaia proza', and ends by referring more generally to the 'artistic work' [*khudozhestvennoe proizvedenie*]. This apparent terminological inconsistency is both exacerbated and explained by the fact that 'Closer to Fact' and 'The Decomposition of *siuzhet*' are also replete with allusions that have ostensibly little to do with literature, allusions to painting, photography and of course 'moving pictures'. And this in turn reveals that another important element is present in the projection of *literatura fakta*, the alluring illusion of the 'photographic' or 'documentary' principle that lies at the heart of naïve – and sometimes not so naïve – theories of film.

Brik's idea of an unmediated form of essentially non-artistic representation, in which the reader is somehow presented with an unvarnished image of reality that confirms film's 'documentary superiority' over the written word, is developed through a comparison between painting and photography in the 1928 article 'From Picture to Photo' ('Ot kartiny k foto'; Brik 1928).¹⁵ Before photography, Brik argues, painting and drawing were the only available means for the 'fixation of visual facts' (Brik 1928: 29), a formula repeated with mantra-like insistence. Initially, however, photography, like all youthful media, fell into the trap of imitating the conventions of painting, only gradually realising its 'own possibilities and its own forms' (Brik 1928: 30). Essentially, Brik argues, where painting is fated to render its

object ‘in isolation’, photography is able to capture the fact that the object is in ‘constant motion and in constant connection with other things’; photography is a medium of ‘real time and space’, which is therefore able to render the ‘real nature’ of things, which ‘exist [...] outside of, before, and after the taking of the photograph’ (Brik 1928: 31). This is not only a technical matter, but an explicitly ideological one. The isolating effect of painting is to aestheticize or even heroicize its object in an act of ‘iconography’, as opposed to photography’s ‘fixation of visual facts’ (Brik 1928: 33); in a characteristic play on words, painting (‘art’ – *iskusstvo*) will always be ‘artificial’ [*iskusstvenno*], as opposed to ‘real’ (Brik 1928: 31). Form, for Brik, in a development of its identification with ‘content’, is inseparable from ideology. And if still photography is capable of capturing the ‘reality’ of the continuity of objects in time and space, even as it ‘fixes’ them in a static moment amid the flux of life, the newest means for the ‘fixation of visual facts’, cinema, is uniquely able to literalise its images of flux and motion.¹⁶

Cinema, too, however, has not only been indirectly entrapped in the conventions of ancestor media – painting, theatre and literature –, but also directly encumbered by the burden of a particular content: two aspects, for Brik, of the manner in which it has been ideologically undermined. Brik dramatizes the latter aspect by recounting how, on the facade of a provincial cinema theatre, Lenin’s invocation of cinema as ‘the most important of all the arts’ was juxtaposed with a poster for Ewald Dupont’s German melodrama *Die grüne Manuela* (1923),¹⁷ which contradicts Brik’s summary of Lenin’s primary concern: ‘the development in the masses of a correct, real attitude towards reality’ (Brik 1927a: 27). Cinema, rather than peddling images of the ‘beautiful life’ of bourgeois society, however ideologically inflected on the superficial level, should instead utilise its technological superiority to present ‘the most necessary facts of [...] reality’ (Brik 1927a: 27). This is the ‘real reality’ demanded in ‘Closer to Fact’, neither ‘deformed’, ‘violated’, nor ‘perverted’, but ‘concretized’ as an event in ‘real time and space’. Only a cinema that embodies a ‘sober attitude to reality, an active relationship to the cognized fact’ will be able replace (in a nod to Trotsky) the ‘spiritual vodka’ of commercial cinema – western and Soviet – with a cinema capable of fostering a ‘new cultural consciousness’ in direct contact with ‘real material’ (see Trotskii 1923).

Brik is undoubtedly close in these positions to other Lefovites, notably Sergei Tret'iakov, who is, if anything, more insistently doctrinaire on the question of the primacy of ‘material’. Tret'iakov seeks to polarise the debate on cinema on the model of Lenin’s *Kto-kogo* device, rhetorically asking ‘Whose side are you on?’, with the implication that only *LEF* is capable of resisting the rest of cinema’s ‘philistine [*obyvatel'skoe*] desertion of the

revolution' (Tret'iakov 1927: 1, 5; Brewster 1971: 69, 73). This is consistent also with his insistence on the existence of a 'general line' in *LEF*, a proposition that does not survive retrospective examination.¹⁸ Tret'iakov emphasizes above all the definitive significance of material and builds a theory on the question of the *extent* to which the material is 'deformed' [*iskazhenno*] or even 'ruined' [*isporchenno*], language that is very close to that of Brik.

Tret'iakov's somewhat mechanical theory of extent or degree – documentary will, generally speaking, 'deform' the material to a lesser extent than the fiction or 'played' film – is rejected by both Brik and, more insistently, Shklovskii. While acknowledging the importance of material, Shklovskii's concern is more pragmatic than strictly theoretical, in two senses: first, for the disarmingly simple reason that, as Tret'iakov and Brik would agree, even progressive filmmakers have been guilty of selecting the 'wrong' material, leading to the fatal incongruities the latter has short-handed in terms of 'the beautiful life'.¹⁹ The second sense in play relates to Shklovskii's own theory and practice of prose literature more than it does to cinema. Shklovskii's qualified acknowledgment of the pre-eminence of material – 'the material takes priority. For today' (Tret'iakov, Shklovskii, Shub 1927: 56; Brewster 1971: 78) – is secondary to his insistence that the 'elementary' distinction between 'played' [*igrovaia*] and 'unplayed' [*neigrovaia*] film must give way to the distinction between *fabul'nye* and *nefabul'nye* pictures (Tret'iakov, Shklovskii, Shub 1927: 57; Brewster 1971: 79).²⁰ The question of material as such – at least in the more doctrinaire terms deployed by Tret'iakov and Brik, is – or will become, when Shklovskii's own artistic practice has become the norm for both literature and cinema – secondary to the projection of a 'higher Formalism', in which the material itself determines the necessary means for its formulation. Beginning from pre-existent or 'generic' narrative frames and 'applying' them to material of whatever kind, or, worse, imagining that *fabula* can somehow precede material,²¹ is like looking through the wrong end of a telescope; instead, the writer or filmmaker must begin 'by studying the material', not with a view to minimizing its 'deformation' as such – Shklovskii does not believe, even for a moment, that this is possible – but in order to protect it from a particular kind of deformation, the deformation wrought by persistent – and therefore, by definition, reified – formal and narrative means. This is the underlying meaning of Shklovskii's contention that, rather than being the implicitly passive object of authorial or technological 'deformation', 'the material itself is always intelligent', an argument later developed, as the *LEF* debate on cinema subsided in non-conclusion, into a formula that might stand for a later, 'historicized' Formalist conception of art in general:

The argument about documentary film is at root incredibly complex, and cannot be resolved without taking into account the dialectics of artistic form. A given device, introduced as non-aesthetic, may become aestheticised, that is, it may change its function (Shklovskii 1928: 35).

It is far from coincidental that this injunction – in its own way a ‘resolution’ also of the debate on *literatura fakta* – follows immediately on from an anecdotal invocation of Brik’s devotion to the unadorned, to an un-‘deformed’ material that somehow presents itself to a reader/viewer without mediation:

Brik was attempting to persuade a workers’ audience that they should read the newspapers. They politely replied: ‘Fine, in the morning we’ll read the newspapers, but what about the evenings?’ That is, they demonstrated to him that what was being offered to them did not fulfil the same function as the thing it was supposed to replace [literature] (Shklovskii 1928: 35).²²

Brik thus emerges, even in the self-consciously radical context of LEF, which had set itself up as the only alternative to counter-revolutionary philistinism in art and culture, as a radical’s radical, more aligned with Tret’iakov than with his erstwhile ‘Formalist’ comrade Shklovskii.²³ His demand for an ‘entirely new approach’ to both literature and cinema, one that will embody the unity of form and content (ideology) and be adequate to the tasks of Socialism – colourfully short-handed as ‘dragging the country out of the petty-bourgeois swamp’ (Brik 1927a: 30) – is obedient neither to the earlier or later (historicized) phase of Formalism, nor to any form of properly Marxist analysis, towards which the latter increasingly curves. Theoretically and polemically, he is a committed proponent of a *kino fakta* that will parallel and, due to the nature of its medium, supersede the *literatura fakta* that is a less contested ‘fact’ of Soviet cultural history.

At precisely the same time as *Novyi Lef* provides a forum for this theoretical and polemical debate – the years 1927 and 1928 – Brik also enters the cinema as a practitioner, both as screenwriter and administrator. On becoming Head of the *Litotdel* at Mezhrabpom, by far the most successful quasi-private studio of the Soviet 1920s, his position as commissioner-in-chief of new projects and as a screenwriter in his own right would appear to offer him the perfect platform upon which to pursue the *kino fakta* increasingly implied by his theoretical and publicistic writings. As Tret’iakov acknowledges at the beginning of his

contribution to 'Lef and Film', LEF's deeds in production have not always coincided with its words 'in theory': 'LEF theory can sometimes be diametrically opposed to the work it is doing in the production sphere' (Tret'iakov, Shklovskii, Shub 1927: 50; Brewster 1971: 74). There is no better figure than Brik upon whom to base an examination of this proposition.

Kinopraxis I: *Storm over Asia*

*Bom-bom-tili-bom –
Chto za strannaia kartina –
Viktor Shklovskii iz Sovkino
Ugodil v Mezhrabpom.
Slovom – ver' ili ne ver' –
Ne uderzhish'sia ot krika:
– “Tret'ia fabrika teper'
Stanet fabrikoiu Brika”²⁴*

Brik was active in Mezhrabpom from late 1926, and became Head of the Script Department in late summer/autumn of 1927, at which time he was also joined by Shklovskii as 'consultant-screenwriter'.²⁵ Although Brik was effectively tied to an exclusive contract, the role brought with it wide-ranging responsibilities and, on the face of it, a degree of power within the organisation. This is reflected in his involvement as screenwriter with one of the studio's most successful pictures of the late 1920s, Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Storm over Asia*, produced in 1928 and released in 1929 to a fair degree of critical success. Yet *Storm over Asia* almost immediately confirms that the theoretical and polemical platform Brik developed through 1927 and 1928, which as we have seen emphasizes, in Anatolii Valiuzhenich's summary, 'the dominance of fact over invention', does not survive contact with a different brand of 'reality', namely the reality of film production, in which context the problem of the relative 'authorial' significance of writer and director immediately asserts itself.²⁶ There are two ways to approach this question: the first is to contextualise it against the broad debate around the importance of the script that accompanied the literary campaign that brought Brik and others to the cinema in the first place and continued into the 1930s; the second, to which we will then turn, is to examine a specific paradox of the process of adaptation in *Storm over Asia*.

Brik himself contributed to a dispute on the place of the writer and dramatist in the cinema on 9 April 1929 ('Mesto pisatel'ia i dramaturga v kino', Valiuzhenich 1993: 29), and would later reflect explicitly on *Storm over Asia* in a 1936 contribution to the collection *How we Work on a Film Script* (*Kak my rabotaem nad kinostsenariem*) entitled 'From the Theory

and Practice of a Script Writer' ('Iz teorii i praktiki stsenarista'; Brik 1936). Brik's article is at once illuminating of his film practice – and, to a lesser extent, theory – and at the same time opens up a series of contradictions in and between them. His bold and precariously ironic conclusion, for example – 'I find Pudovkin's ending a bit cheap, and a little too "cinematic"' – is less relevant to a discussion of directorial 'fidelity' to the script than it is to the broader question of the tenability of 'factography' in the cinema. The basis of Brik's complaint about Pudovkin's ending is that the storm is *symbolic*, and 'sweeps away all taint of occupation, including people and tin cans' (Brik 1936; Brik 1974: 103). Brik argues that 'Red Moscow would have been a far more credible final symbol', but doesn't challenge – from the perspective of the article of 1936 *and*, implicitly, from the perspective of the original script of 1928 – the fundamentally *symbolic* nature of visual representation. This would appear to align him with what has become a standard interpretation of broadly Lefovite film practice, summarized by Galina Antipova as 'the transformation of fact into symbol'.²⁷ Antipova correctly labels this 'paradoxical', on the basis that the fundamental theoretical premise of a cinema or literature of fact must be the outright *rejection* of symbolic language, of the search for 'visual analogues' to the literary tropes that structure and conventionalise representation in ways that Brik has earlier rejected in the name of the dominance of the material in itself.

On a more general level, Brik's article, from the distant perspective of 1936, militates against the premium placed on the script in the late 1920s in its contention that:

A script is the outline of a future film. We see the finished films and we cease to be interested in their outlines. The realised object thrusts the process of its construction out of our consciousness. The script drops into the wastepaper basket and ceases to exist even as an archive document; the rare enthusiasts of the art of script writing are obliged to study from the finished film (Brik 1974: 99).

And yet, Brik continues, 'the process of work on the script is far more important than the finished script [...] It is essential that we preserve all the agendas and minutes of the script conferences' (Brik 1974: 99).²⁸ If the former is true, then the question arises: why – apart from facilitating the activity of which the present article is an exemplar – insist on the latter? The answer may lie once again in the relationship between Brik's script and Pudovkin's

realisation of it, which brings us to the second problem we have identified, which in turn relates in quite specific ways to the problem of adaptation.

The core of 'From the Theory and Practice of a Script Writer' is not really theory at all, but rather a very particular exemplification of practice; the article is, in fact, an anecdote about an anecdote, and will allow us to speculate from a quite different perspective on the status of 'fact' and the primacy of 'material'. As Valiuzhenich has noted, the original press advertisement for *Storm over Asia* attributes the screenplay to Brik and a certain 'I. M. Novokshenov' (Valiuzhenich 1993: 230). A later advertisement clarifies that the film has been adapted from a *novel* by Novokshenov, but that the script was written solely by Brik (the catalogue *Sovetskie khudozhestvennye fil'my* gives the little-known writer's name as 'Novokshonov'; Valiuzhenich 1993: 230). No such novel existed, at least in 1928.

Brik explains that he had run into Novokshonov and, although the two weren't particularly close, Brik knew that he had been in the Far East during the Civil War, and asked if he could recall any 'interesting facts and incidents' (Brik 1974: 99). Novokshonov duly recounted the tale of a Mongolian boy captured by the English, who was wearing an amulet with an inscription proclaiming him the heir to Genghis-Khan. Brik's reaction that this was 'a splendid theme for a script' prompted Novokshonov to ask that any script be credited 'from a story by Novokshonov': 'I agreed, of course', writes Brik, 'but Novokshonov never did write the story' (Brik 1974: 100). *Storm over Asia* was therefore 'adapted' from an anecdote that was to be the basis for a story that had not been written. Brik's certainty that Novokshonov 'never did write the story' is explained by the fact that it was written only later, at an undetermined time before Novokshonov's death in 1943 (possibly in 1933), and published in 1966. As Valiuzhenich gleefully concludes, therefore, 'the script wasn't written "from the novel of the same name by Novokshonov", but rather the story by Novokshonov was written under the influence of the film of the same name' (Valiuzhenich 1993: 233).²⁹

This aspect of the film's genesis dominates the small part of the critical response to it that refers explicitly to Brik, and in chiefly and predictably negative ways. O. Arsen, for example, writing in the journal *Kino*, characterises Brik as an 'established opponent of the anecdote', who has nonetheless built *Storm over Asia* on the basis of anecdote – as opposed to 'fact'. The result is what the reviewer provocatively calls an 'artistic fact [...] We will await Brik's rejection of this fact on the pages of *Novyi Lef*' (Arsen 1928: 4).³⁰ Brik's first significant contribution to the cinema, which was being advertised as a 'world blockbuster' within a month of its opening,³¹ thus makes no commensurate contribution to the popularisation of a *kino fakta*. Worse, *Storm over Asia* would turn out to be the only film

made from a Brik script to be completed and released during his tenure as Head of Mezhrabpom's Script Department.

Kinopraxis II: 2-*Bul'di-2*

The next script Brik wrote and put into production, a drama set in the circus during the time of the Civil War with the title *2-Bul'di-2*, was initially to be directed by Lev Kuleshov (GFF 2/1/207: 150). *2-Bul'di-2* is a loosely allegorical tale of a father-and-son circus act during the Civil War, built around the 'coming to ideological consciousness' of the father, somewhat in the manner of Pudovkin's earlier *Mat'/Mother* (1926). Although there were no immediate objections to Brik's original script on grounds of censorship (GFF 2/1/207: 149), Kuleshov himself questioned the script's merits, sarcastically considering it 'high art' to be able to show the Civil War from the perspective of both Reds and Whites, while at the same time producing an 'apolitical script' (GFF 2/1/207: 151). Brik's depiction of 'revolutionary events' is, for Kuleshov, little more than a 'mechanical' fixation of the shift of power, driven by emotional considerations more than considerations of class, and which – damningly for Brik as a proponent of cinema's ability to concretize 'real time and space' – 'could have been played out in any epoch, in any country' (GFF 2/1/207: 151). Kuleshov also considered it less than worthwhile to re-write the script, given that Sovkino were on the point of releasing an 'identical' film, which he considered ideologically superior to *2-Bul'di-2* (GFF 2/1/207: 151r); this was *Poslednii attraktsion/The Last Attraction* (aka *Agitfurgon*), directed by Ol'ga Preobrazhenskaia and Ivan Pravov and based on an original story by Marietta Shagin'ian – adapted for the screen by none other than Viktor Shklovskii. Brik's contract with Mezhrabpom, as we have seen, was an exclusive one, while the 'consultant' Shklovskii remained free to submit scripts to other studio (RGALI 2852/1/324: 2r).

Kuleshov himself nonetheless agreed to produce a second version of the script (GFF 2/1/207: 137–44), which contained additions largely designed to strengthen the film's narrative coherence – although with one significant exception. Kuleshov, not Brik, is the author of the sequence in the fourth reel, where the Red Army captain declaims Maiakovskii's famous couplet 'Eat your pineapples and chew on your pheasant / Your last day is approaching, bourgeois' [*Esh' ananasy, riabchikov zhui / Den' tvoi poslednii prikhodit burzhui*], only for the White Army captain to replace 'Bourgeois' *burzhui* with *komissar* (GFF 2/1/207: 146). This version is also approved by Glavrepertkom, although its social significance is said to be 'not high', and the same criticism Kuleshov has levelled at Brik is now associated explicitly with *Kuleshov*: 'Insofar as the film has fallen into the hands of

Kuleshov [...] it will turn out to be highly apolitical' (GFF 2/1/207: 145r.). Yet, despite strong doubts as to the quality of the script expressed by internal reviewers (GFF 2/1/207: 147, 147r), the film went into production and was ostensibly completed in August 1929 (RGALI 2852/1/324: 13).

At this point, however, we might be tempted to compare the dizzying 'shifts of power' depicted in the film as the Civil War runs its complex course with the manner in which the political events of 1929 increasingly affect the internal politics of Mezhrabpom. Further, as is clear from a stenographic record of a meeting on the purge of ARRK [*Assotsiatsiia rabotnikov revoliutsionnoi kinematografii*] that took place on 14 March 1930 (RGALI 2852/1/324: 6–41), *2-Bul'di-2* became more than just the dubiously 'apolitical' and slightly eccentric output the authorities might have expected from a collaboration between Kuleshov and a high-profile Lefovite like Brik – it becomes, in fact, the site of Mezhrabpom's own internal 'civil war'. Grigorii Arustanov, former Director of Goskinprom Gruzii, where his 'only allies' against the 'bourgeois intelligentsia' had been the young Nikolai Shengelaia and Mikhail Chiaureli, was appointed to the Directorate of Mezhrabpom in April 1928, but had only become involved in the internal politics of the studio at the beginning of 1929, at which time he identified *2-Bul'di-2* as a battleground for his fight against 'ideologically alien' pictures (RGALI 2852/1/324: 9). Arustanov judged that *2-Bul'di-2* should remain 'on the shelf', rather than 'clog up [*zasoriat*]' an already clogged Soviet film market' (RGALI 2852/1/324: 9). The film was, however, despite the objections of Arustanov and others, partially re-shot, with Nina Agadzhanova, who was also a 'staff' writer at Mezhrabpom, and had been involved in re-shooting since Kuleshov had first expressed doubts about the value of persisting with the film, now relieving him entirely of an obligation so inimical to Kuleshov's own, extremely rapid film practice, for which she is credited as co-director. Arustanov insists on the pointlessness of further costly re-shooting, arguing that trying 'to make a good film out of a bad one' is an 'extraordinarily difficult thing' (RGALI 2852/1/324: 21). He also explains the lack of decisive action in relation to the film – and other events at Mezhrabpom – in terms of the studio's management structure, which meant that Brik, as Head of the Script Department, was answerable only to Boris Mal'kin, then Chairman of the studio's Directorate, who had maintained warm personal – if not intellectual – relations with LEF. Despite the negative view of the very studio that had produced it, however, the film was nonetheless granted limited release (fifth category) on 21 August 1929, with the rather damning comment that it had neither 'social significance nor formal qualities' (GFF 2/1/207: 19, 19r).

Arustanov characterises his attempts to shelve *2-Bul'di-2* as an example of the ‘palliative measures’ he eventually came to understand were useless in treating an organisation as ‘sick’ as Mezhrabpom: instead, what was required was a ‘change in the leadership of the Script Department’, which, in his estimation, had initiated nothing at all during 1929 that could safely be put into production (RGALI 2852/1/324: 9, 11).³² It isn’t clear when precisely Brik was removed from his position, but a protocol dated 9 October 1929 lists him instead (along with his deputy and future writing partner Leonid Leonidov) merely as a ‘staff writer’ (RGALI 2852/1/324: 4). In the increasingly tense climate of early 1930, Arustanov, encouraged by his inquisitors, and despite the serial transformations in Brik’s theoretical position we have observed, concurs in the view that the main cause of Mezhrabpom’s deviation from the ‘class line’ in 1928 and 1929 was none other than the ‘formalist school’, practically embodied in the studio hierarchy by Brik (RGALI 2852/1/324: 10–11).³³

This effectively sealed the fate of *2-Bul'di-2*: a further proposal to salvage it by re-shooting the opening sequence and adding an additional, crudely agitational sequence, was refused as being ‘vulgar’ – and of doing nothing to ‘rehabilitate’ the film’s ‘apolitical’ nature (GFF 2/1/207: 186, 186r.). The film was eventually given only limited release, this time in the fifth category (GFF 2/1/207: 3), and was finally released only in November 1930; the studio’s reservations did not prevent it from advertising *Bul'di* as a ‘super-blockbuster’, which ‘everyone must see’.³⁴

Overall, *2-Bul'di-2* offers confirmation that Brik’s activities in the film industry are guided more by pragmatism than by theoretical or artistic commitment. It is not only a story of the accommodation of the artistic ‘classes’ to revolutionary conditions, but one that unashamedly utilises all the conventions of ‘kinodrama’, and in which there is no trace of the drive towards *kino fakta*. Indeed, its most satisfying sequence, the ending in which the circus audience call out for Bul'di the younger to join his father in the ring, while the cinema audience believe him to have been shot, only for it to be revealed that the delay is designed to facilitate his escape, is steadfastly the stuff of ‘invention’, as opposed to ‘fact’. All pretensions to an art that dispenses with ‘plot constructions [that] inevitably violate [*nasiluet*] the material’ and deform what is selected in the name of narrative coherence have receded into invisibility (Brik 1929 in Chuzhak 2000: 226). The ‘fixation’ of ‘real material’ as the highest instance of the unity of form and content, its presentation to an audience ‘in its original form’ (Brik 1929 in Chuzhak 2000: 227), is not here the primary task that cinema is uniquely capable of performing.

It is both ironic and deeply instructive that this pragmatic recantation of a radical theoretical position meets nonetheless with predictable accusations of ‘formalist’ or ‘avantgardist’ tendencies. Brik’s defence against such accusations is the highly ambivalent claim that ‘I am a member of *LEF* only in *LEF*; at Mezhrabpom I am a member of staff’ (RGALI 2852/1/324: 23).³⁵ This may be an attempt at self-protection in a changing ideological environment; it might also, however, stand as a ‘true’ reflection of Brik’s attitude towards film theory and practice.³⁶

The Ironies of Fate

We have seen that the reception of *Storm over Asia* was coloured by what Valiuzhenich describes as ‘astonishment at [Brik’s] departure from a commitment to documentary film’, which was clearly seen as the logical corollary of his theorization of *kino fakta*, but which here, and in *2-Bul’di-2*, finds no practical realization on the screen (Valiuzhenich 1993: 27). The events of the period between the release of each film, however, transform the simple non-correspondence of theory and practice into a series of bitter ironies. If the demotion of Brik and Leonidov to the position of ‘staff writers’ at Mezhrabpom which accompanies the tortuous production process of *Bul’di* were not enough in itself, the ignominy is exacerbated by the recommendation that ‘in the immediate future their main work is transferred to the area of *kul’turfil’m*’ (protocol of a meeting of Mezhrabpom, 9 October 1929; RGALI 2852/1/324: 4). Having failed to translate theory into practice in favour of an accommodation with the commercial mainstream, an undertaking as ambitious as it is pragmatic, Brik is *obliged*, as a kind of punishment, to turn to documentary – precisely the domain in which his theory might have found its most eloquent elaboration.

Although it had begun production long after *Bul’di*, Brik’s first documentary as screenwriter, the anti-religious *Opium*, directed by Vitalii Zhemchuzhnyi and made for Sovkino rather than Mezhrabpom, was released before it. *Opium* is a composite documentary, partly consisting of archive footage of the rituals of various religions, partly of inserted ‘played’ sequences from other films. It was released almost a year before *Bul’di* on 31 December 1929 to a press reception that can only be described as appalling. *Izvestiia* recommends ‘serious re-working’ and suggests that the scene of peasant prayers in Eisenstein’s *Staroe i novoe/The General Line* is alone worth more than *Opium* (Char 1930: 4). Other reviewers are keen to emphasize the film’s failure to achieve its central aim, namely ‘anti-religious agitation’; further, the ‘indignant protests and heated attacks’ after a preview at

the *Trud* society mean that the film 'should not be allowed not only into the workers' clubs, but also into commercial theatres' (Shvartsman 1930: 2).

The ironies attending to Brik's belated turn to documentary are deepened, however, by factors that pertain as much to the personal as the professional sphere. The director of *Opium*, Vitalii Zhemchuzhnyi, had become romantically involved with Brik's wife Lily when her involvement with Maiakovskii had come to an end; moreover, the context for that involvement was the making of a picture that corresponds much more closely to the embodiment of *kino fakta* than Brik had attempted at *Mezhrabpom*, and which bears certain similarities to the universally denigrated *Opium*. Co-directed by Lily and Zhemchuzhnyi in 1928, *Stekliannyi glaz/The Glass Eye* is an ambitious attempt to combine archive and new footage in order to satirize the conventions of the played film, and particularly the fixation with glamour Brik has earlier associated with the 'beautiful life' of bourgeois society, which must give way to representation of 'the most necessary facts of [...] reality' (Brik 1927a: 27). The film opened almost at the same time as Vertov's *Chelovek s kinoapparatom/Man with the Movie Camera*, with which it shares the central metaphor of the cine-eye, but received a generally more positive press, largely, perhaps, because of its explicit juxtaposition of 'illusion' and 'reality'.³⁷ Brik has argued in 'Cine-Antidote' ('Protivokinoiadie') that the 'formula' employed by Soviet commercial cinema – combining representation of the 'glamorous life' with a rudimentary 'ideological orientation', thus facilitating the former's 'exposure' – will always produce the 'opposite effect', because the ideological aspect will disappear 'like the froth from milk', leaving the viewer to yearn for the life of bourgeois glamour the film ostensibly purports to expose (Brik 1927a: 28). Yet here Lily and Zhemchuzhnyi endeavour to separate the froth from the milk quite explicitly and from the very outset, leaving the viewer (and the critic) in no doubt as to what is being exposed by what – and at the same time retaining the surface attractions of 'glamour'.

Lily followed the success of *The Glass Eye* by writing a script for an even more intriguing, but unrealised project entitled 'Love and Debt' (*Liubov' i dolg'*), which sought to distinguish illusion and reality yet more insistently – while at the same time offering a slightly belated lesson in the centrality of montage. Here the conceit was the filming of a foreign picture ('Love and Debt'), which would be successively re-edited, without any additional footage, to produce entirely different pictures, suitable in turn for a 'youth' audience, for Soviet distribution, for the American market, until finally, in the fifth reel, the reels are returned to the studio to be wiped and re-used. Vasilii Katanian speculates that jealousy, of Lily in general and of the success of *The Glass Eye* in particular, prevented the

picture from being made, although Brik's tribulations at Mezhrabpom through late 1929 must have played as significant a role (Katanian 2002: 85–86).

The couple's difficulties through late 1929 and early 1930 were not, however, restricted to the conflicts within Mezhrabpom. Brik's central response to his removal from Mezhrabpom, notwithstanding the completion and release of *Opium*, implies a disenchantment with the cinema. On 14 June 1929 he submitted to Goslitizdat a declaration of intention to found a successor organisation to *LEF*, to be called *Revoliutsionnyi front iskusstva* (*REF*), and dedicated to 'the mobilization of all literary-artistic forces of the socialist sector in the decisive struggle against [...] bourgeois and petty-bourgeois tendencies' (Maiakovskii 1961: 213–14). The main slogan of the new organisation, moreover, was 'For Socialist propaganda, against apolitical *kul'turnichestvo*' (Maiakovskii, 1961: 214).³⁸ The application was accepted by Goslitizdat, and two book-length collections planned; a 'literary evening' entitled 'REF Opens' was held on 8th October 1929 (Maiakovskii 1959: 510–11). But the organisation was fated never to come into existence in any material form. Brik and Lily were refused a visa to visit London and Berlin at the end of 1929, an event gleefully publicised through an article in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* (10 January 1930) entitled 'A Spousal Trip at Government Expense' (cited from Valiuzhenich 1993: 30). The implication that a purely personal trip was being funded by the state was vigorously repudiated in the same newspaper on 14 January 1930 by no less than Maiakovskii himself (cited from Valiuzhenich 1993: 30). The irony here consists in the fact that Maiakovskii's response is published *in the name of REF*; yet Maiakovskii had submitted an application to join the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (*RAPP*) on 3rd January, sounding the death-knell not only for *REF*, but symbolising also the end of any last vestiges of plurality in Soviet cultural affairs.³⁹

Brik's further involvement in the cinema cannot in fact be considered as meaningfully distinct from his activities in those other areas in which (in addition to his constant journalistic output) he sought to make a living in the transformed cultural environment of the 1930s – theatre and, perhaps least likely of all, opera. Four plays co-written with Leonidov were performed in Moscow,⁴⁰ but none were as successful as the first of two operas for which Brik wrote the libretto, *Kamarinskii muzhik*, written to music by Valerii Zhelobinskii, and produced at the Leningrad State Maly Opera Theatre (Gosudarstvennyi Leningradskii Maliy opernyi teatr, MALEGOT) in 1933. Brik's success as a writer of verse provides a different kind of answer to the one rhetorically sought in 'To Hell with Poetry' four years earlier; the libretto was considered by none other than Shklovskii to be so well written, 'in such verse

that an opera has never been written in before', that 'it didn't require music' (Shklovskii 1934: 2).⁴¹

In the cinema, two further documentaries would see the light of day, eight years apart: the first was *Kem byt' / Who Am I?*, again directed by Zhemchuzhnyi and released in 1932; the second was the cinematic extension of the line of trade that would sustain Brik more than any other, entitled simply *Vladimir Maiakovskii*, and released in 1940. This does not imply, however, a principled retreat from the feature film; on the contrary. Brik's archive at RGALI (2852/1/322) contains evidence, in the form of manuscript or typescript originals or contracts with various studios, of twenty-two further film projects from 1931; Valiuzhenich (1993: 363–64), however, lists considerably more.

The extent to which Brik's influence had diminished can be gleaned from the denouement of a project for Mezhrabpom undertaken in 1933 with the directorial team of Pudovkin and Aleksandr Golovnia, with whom Brik had worked on *Storm over Asia*. The film was initially entitled 'Contact' ('Est' kontakt'), for which Brik and Leonidov duly delivered several versions of a script in 'the closest contact' with Golovnia through March and April. Rather than subsequently approve Golovnia's shooting script (under the revised title 'On Personal Responsibility', 'Pod lichnuiu otvetstvennost'), the new head of Mezhrabpom Iakov Zaitsev refused to put it into production, brutally dismissing it as 'hack work' [*khaltura*], and surmising that Golovnia's initial interest in the project could only have been explained by a 'temporary loss of judgement' [*vremennym pomracheniem rassudka*] (RGALI 2852/1/335: 4).⁴²

Whatever the precise number of scripts undertaken or completed after 1931, the most salient fact is that only three went into production, all of which involved the intervention of the same Lev Kuleshov who had begun, but not completed, *2-Bul'di-2*. The first was the never-to-be completed *Dokhunda*, for which material was filmed in Stalinabad in 1935; the second was *Sibiriaki/Siberians*, for which Brik was engaged to repair a script by Aleksandr Vitenzon, and for which Brik was not credited on the film's release in 1940; the third – Brik's last work in the cinema – was an adventure for Soiuzdetfilm in 1941 entitled *Sluchai v vulkane/Incident on a Volcano*, to which Brik's contribution was once again a late re-write, this time of a script by Mikhail Rozenfel'd, which Kuleshov, Brik, and Aleksandra Khokhlova proceeded to 'save' by re-shooting almost half of it in a period of two or three weeks (Shikhmatov 1941: 2).⁴³ A rare contemporary review notes that the film has had 'a very long and unfortunate history', which will be of interest only to a 'narrow circle of cinema professionals' (Shikhmatov 1941: 2); it would be cruel to issue the same verdict in

relation to Brik's career in the cinema as a whole, but evasive in the extreme to avoid doing so in relation to the period after *Bul'di* and his departure from Mezhrabpom.

Postscript: Facts, Life, and Theory

Brik's relocation to the cultural margins is of course by no means uncommon in the case of representatives of various strands of the avant-garde (although it should be acknowledged that there were exceptions to this rule, and that there are degrees of marginality). His fate is clearly tied to the shifts in state cultural policy that accelerated through 1928 and 1929, as is the fate of LEF as an organisation, and the context in which any debate around a *kino fakta* could be meaningfully sustained. The danger in subscribing too avidly to this dominant narrative of the decisive role of 'exterior' forces and events, however, is that it offers a global explanation for any and every cultural and theoretical development – or, more pointedly, for any and every *absence* of cultural and theoretical development. It creates, in other words, an illusion of its own, which allows artistic and theoretical failures of any kind to be attributed to *force majeure*, with the unspoken implication that a given tendency or theoretical proposition would inevitably have prospered in different conditions. It is, therefore, impossible to conclude an account of Brik's time in the cinema without shifting focus once again away from the purely personal dimension, and reconstructing – with due practical and theoretical consideration – the sense in which a *kino fakta* was programmed for eventual demise by the terms in which it was conceived, by its own *internal* contradictions, as much as by force of external circumstance.

This is not to under-estimate the importance of perhaps the single most significant event in the cinematic landscape of the late 1920s, the First All-Union Party Conference on Cinema that took place on 20 and 21 March 1928 (Anon. 1928: 3), and which conditioned all public debate on cinema for months in advance, including the LEF discussion to which we have referred. Maria Zalambani has argued, in fact, that the entire LEF discussion is little more than an attempt, largely driven by Brik, to adapt to and even anticipate the demands of the Party, and hence that the Party Conference signals the 'end of the debate'.⁴⁴ This falls too readily into the trap we have identified, and in so doing buries the nuance – theoretical *and* 'political' – of various positions under the weight of a homogenised force of circumstance.

As Bulgakova has pointed out, *practice* lies closer to the heart of the contradictions that culminate in the 'end of the debate' than external circumstance. We have already seen, in our analyses of *Storm over Asia* and *2-Bul'di-2*, that practice confronts putative theory in the most prosaic of senses, constraining, at the level of script, production and distribution, what

can and cannot easily be done; in what follows, I will attempt to show that practice also in fact lays bare the theoretical and conceptual incommensurability of the various elements that are imperfectly synthesized in the idea of *kino fakta* as pursued in particular, if not exclusively, by Brik. This is not just a case of concurring with Antipova's summary of Bulgakova's withering definition of the relationship between film theory and film practice in LEF, to the effect that 'in practice the LEF screenwriters reproduced the very same banal narratives [*siuzhetnye skhemy*] they had theoretically rejected' – a restatement of the charge Tret'iakov acknowledges in 1927 (Antipova 2010: 409; Tret'iakov, Shklovskii, Shub 1927: 50; Brewster 1971: 74). That conclusion, while undoubtedly accurate, also acts to foreclose more complex questions, questions not of what had been 'theoretically rejected', but rather of what had been theoretically *occluded* by the terms of the LEF 'programme' itself. This can be organised under two broad and inter-related headings: first, in relation to fundamental questions of mediality; second, in relation to the recurrent problem of material.

The first of these can be observed immediately in the collectively composed editorial published at the end of 1927, in which the claim that the displacement of easel painting by photography is or will be paralleled by the displacement of *belles lettres* by 'factography' is followed by the casual assertion that 'It can be assumed that schema appropriate to the fine arts will apply equally to the cinema' (Editorial 1927: 2; Brewster 1971: 68). The problem here is that what we have termed the illusion of the 'documentary' or 'photographic' principle is implicitly subjected to a multi-faceted misapplication: not only has it been mobilised in the service of the creation of a *literatura fakta* – a theoretically precarious move, given the fundamental medial distinction between the verbal and the visual – it is now, so to speak, 'repatriated' to the visual domain in order to underpin an undifferentiated *kino fakta* – which emerges as a tertiary projection of an illusion built on its own secondary use.⁴⁵ A debate that makes a fetish of the distinction between *igrovaia* and *neigrovaia* cinema is nonetheless conducted in wilful disregard of the more fundamental distinction, almost hidden in plain view, between the media in which 'facts' are somehow to be presented; this, more than any other factor, programmes the theoretical confusion in LEF – a *de facto* 'anarchy of opinions' – in contrast to what Tret'iakov valiantly presents as a 'general line' (Editorial 1927: 2; Brewster 1971: 68; Tret'iakov, Shklovskii, Shub 1927: 50; Brewster 1971: 74).

The second key problem is closely related to the first. For all the various insistences on the primacy of material, and despite Shklovskii's eagerness to 'correct' Tret'iakov in this regard, no stable concept of material emerged from LEF. Just as the Formalists had vacillated between conflicting conceptions of *literary* material – which was first conceptualised in terms

of the political, historical and ‘real-life’ events associated with *fabula*, before being re-conceived in terms of *language* itself⁴⁶ – so too are the various positions adopted by Tret'iakov, Shklovskii and Brik haunted by this lack of clarity. Indeed, a commitment to a ‘material aesthetics’ founded on an unelaborated conception of material might be seen as the main bequest of Formalism to LEF.

In terms of cinema, the first conception of material in association with *fabula* remains more or less intact, simply because the question of *medium* doesn't interfere with the selection and organization of such material: the question of whether it is drawn from a ‘pre-literary’ or a ‘pre-cinematic’ environment is a logical nonsense. It is when we – or, more accurately, when Shklovskii – turn(s) to the second sense of material as already ‘linguistic’ or ‘discursive’, already inscribed or formulated in a manner that disengages it from *fabula*, that problems specific to cinema arise. The attempt to fashion a parallel ‘second’ conception of material for the cinema leads Shklovskii to assert that

The fundamental material of cinematography is a particular kind of cine-word [*kinoslovo*] – a segment [*otrezok*] of photographic material with a definite meaning. Cinematographic material therefore by its very nature gravitates towards *siuzhet* as a means for the organization of cine-words, cine-phrases (‘Semantika kino’, Shklovskii 1985: 32).

Shklovskii has originally aimed this criticism at Vertov, but it forms the basis also of his censure of Tret'iakov's alleged primitivism: material conceived in terms of its ‘rawness’, its absolute resistance to ‘deformation’, lacks in Shklovskii's significant phrase any sense of ‘attitude [*otnoshenie*] to things’.⁴⁷ Whether in defence of his own artistic-critical position or in pursuit of a never-to-be-realised dialectical and materialist aesthetics, Shklovskii thus defines the very limits of ‘factography’, and at the same time exposes the limits of his own theoretical-methodological position.⁴⁸ A LEF theory of material is stranded between a form of ‘zero degree’ non-transformation of photographic ‘real reality’ – a committed, absolute, but ultimately impossible *kino fakta* – and a pseudo-literary, covertly aestheticized theory that cannot in any sense be termed *kino fakta*, or indeed answer the demands of a theoretical position devoted to ‘the problem of the social function of things produced by workers in art’ (Editorial. 1927: 1; Brewster 1971: 67).

‘Stranded’, or at the very least ‘conflicted’, may very well be the term to describe Brik’s position in this regard. On one hand, he appears to offer unequivocal support to Shklovskii in ‘correcting’ Tret’iakov during the ‘Lef i kino’ roundtable:

Since when have we begun speaking about the possibility of transmitting some kind of fact by means of conditional signs? Cinematic material [...] is already deformed. We should therefore not speak of deformation (Tret’iakov 1927b: 63).⁴⁹

This is the equivalent of Shklovskii’s rather more florid contention, after Goethe, that

‘You sit right in front of a tree, draw it as carefully as you can, and what part of the tree ends up on paper?’ The very same thing happens with the film camera (Tret’iakov 1927: 55; Brewster 1971: 67).

On the other hand, Brik not only explicitly opposes Shklovskii (on the ‘aestheticism’ of Vertov’s *Odinadtsatyi/The Eleventh*),⁵⁰ he also goes on, as we have seen, to propound an approach to material that is not so much ‘theoretical’, properly speaking, but rather openly polemical in its commitment to an unelaborated phenomenon – life, *byt*, production, fact – that will temper art’s claims to transformation (and possibly also transcendence). Brik’s last significant contribution to the debate, ‘The Decomposition of *Siuzhet*’, as even its title suggests, is a polemical attempt to settle accounts with Shklovskii’s aestheticism grounded in (or obscured by) an unbending commitment to a poetics of *siuzhet* (even in its inverted form). Where for Shklovskii the ‘writer’ who introduces ‘documents’ ‘does not cease to be an artist, but merely changes the sphere of application of the artistic principle’ (‘Semantika kino’, Shklovskii 1985: 32), for Brik the question is initially less equivocally clear, and is eventually turned on its head. In 1927, during the LEF roundtable, he asks aloud

Should we insist that we will produce only documents, or should we create an intermediary form of cinema, that is, by utilizing the same material, create a more accessible [*bole shirokaia*] form? This is not clear to me (Tret’iakov 1927: 64).

It is tempting ultimately to classify Brik's own cinematic output as an imperfect attempt to resolve this dilemma.

By 1929, however, when he has retreated – or been forced to retreat – from the ground of this potential 'intermediary form', all trace of equivocation and uncertainty have once again disappeared:

The contemporary customer [*potrebitel'*] sees the artistic work not as value, but as a means, as a method of transmitting [*peredacha*] real material. [...] The material is primary, and the artistic work is only one possible means of its concretization (Brik 1929: 228).

Where for Shklovskii, 'art needs advances, not victories' (Brik, Pertsov, Shklovskii 1928: 36; Brewster 1971: 90), for Brik, even after a series of personal defeats, the victory of material – perhaps even over art itself – remains the real objective.⁵¹

The allure of 'victory,' which is quite different from the possibility of an accommodation or compromise with an as yet unknown 'official' position, is the key to Brik's political stance, not only in 1927, but also and more significantly *after* the course of Soviet cinema had been largely determined in the wake of the Party Conference on Cinema. It is also, therefore, the key to understanding the ways in which his theoretical position, which is inseparable from its manifestation in polemic, is affected by the political situation, without being one-dimensionally determined by it. Along with the least quoted participant in the LEF debates on cinema, Boris Arvatov,⁵² Brik is unequivocal in his insistence that the problems facing the cinema are all related to the absence of a state monopoly on production. Further, the 'struggle' is not with the Party, but with the 'cinema administration' and indeed with the *audience*:⁵³

we want the Party to assist us in this regard [...] This point of view will not only be that of LEF. Both *Glavrepertkom* and *Glavpolitprosvet* intend to embark on this line.⁵⁴

Brik, and indeed many of his fellow Lefovites,⁵⁵ sincerely share – and in fact, in the positive sense of the word, anticipate – the later official verdict that the cinema had essentially failed to contribute to Socialist construction. Their condemnation of the first decade of Soviet cinema – including, we must remember, the later canonised achievements of both Vertov and

Eisenstein – is even less equivocal than that of the conservative ‘right’, although it is delivered in quite different terms. They are representatives not simply of an avant-garde conceived of in homogeneous and de-territorialised terms, and fated therefore to be swept away by the inimical forces of the state, but rather of an avowedly *Socialist* avant-garde, committed to the idea of *sotsial'nyi zakaz* and the service of art to the workers’ state, whose relationship to the state apparatus is therefore much more complex. It is only in the context of this relationship that we can understand Brik’s response to the ‘rout’ of the avant-garde, in cinema and elsewhere, and indeed his own removal from any position of influence. Rather than repent his errors, as did Shklovskii, albeit with an ambivalence so delicately judged it remained almost undetectable (Shklovskii 1930: 4), Brik *commits* to a radical conception of art in conditions of Socialism to such an extent that the conceptual unsustainability of a *kino fakta* becomes invisible to him, secondary to the core necessity of an art that will ‘reflect’ and, more importantly, serve Soviet reality. He dreams of the victory of reality (material) over art, a dream far too radical for any state apparatus seeking to utilise art as an instrument of its own survival.

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¹ Brik, Pertsov, Shklovskii 1928: 36; Brewster 1971: 90.

² Tynianov, for example, along with Boris Eikhenbaum and leading literary figures such as Evgenii Zamiatin and Mikhail Zoshchenko, joined the newly formed 'Cine-Literary Committee' of the *Sevzapkino* studio in late 1925: see Tsiv'ian and Toddes 1986: 90.

³ 'Ob osnovakh kino' in Tynianov 1977: 326–45 (English translation in Taylor 1982: 32–54); 'O siuzhete i fabule v kino' in Tynianov 1977: 324–5; 'O stsensarii' in Tynianov 1977: 323–4. On the other hand, Aage Hansen-Löve attributes an early Formalist theory of film to Shklovskii, although conceding that this emerged primarily as a 'servant' of Shklovskii's principal aim, a theory of *vnesiuzhetnaia proza*, which will be the subject of later remarks: Khanzen-Love 2001: 328; Shklovskii 1923b; and, for a parallel theory that seeks to extend the concept of *ostranenie* to the cinema, Shklovskii 1924: 242–52. Hansen-Löve also acknowledges that this variant of Formalist film theory gives way to that of Tynianov; for an over-view of the stages of development of Formalist film theory in Hansen-Löve's analysis, see Khanzen-Love 2001: 327–46.

⁴ See in this regard: Eikhenbaum 1927a: 116–48; Eikhenbaum 1978: 3–37. See also Erlich 1980; Khanzen-Love 2001; Steiner 1984; and Renfrew 2006.

⁵ One of the difficulties in assessing Shklovskii's contribution is that his writing on film more often than not has an occasional, as opposed to theoretical, character. His contribution to the Formalist collection on cinema, *Poetika kino* (Eikhenbaum 1927: 137–42; English version Taylor 1982: 87–9), is a significantly brief and provocative sketch on the relations between 'prose' and 'poetry' and, respectively, plot and 'plotlessness' in the cinema. For a sense of the range of his film writings, see Shklovskii 1985. Another somewhat prosaic difficulty is that Shklovskii's career as a screenwriter stretches unevenly from 1926 to 1970, further problematizing any putative relationship between film writing and film practice.

At the other end of the spectrum, Eikhenbaum's activity in the film industry, which began like that of his colleagues with the so-called 'literary campaign' of 1925, is little more than a footnote both to his own career and to the history of the cinema: Eikhenbaum taught a course at the State Institute for the History of Art [GIIL] on 'General Theory of Cinema', and edited *Poetika kino*, which contains his own essay 'Problemy kino-stilistiki' (Eikhenbaum 1927: 11–52). The article has appeared twice in English translation, first as 'Problems of Film Stylistics', in *Screen*, 3 (1974), pp. 7–32, and later as 'Problems of Cine-Stylistics', in Taylor 1982: 5–31.

⁶ For an overview of Tynianov's work in the cinema, see Renfrew 2007; Sepman 1973; and Tsiv'ian and Toddes 1986.

⁷ Shklovskii had already been forced to leave Petrograd for Saratov in order to avoid arrest in 1918, at which time his brother Nikolai, also an SR, was arrested and shot. Shklovskii had been close enough to the events in Saratov that eventually led to the 1922 trial to later become the object of false testimony. For Shklovskii's own account of this period, see Shklovsky 1970: 131–276.

⁸ Brik's short article of 1923, 'Tak nazyvaemyi formal'nyi metod' (Brik 1923a), published in the first issue of *Lef*, has been rightly interpreted as indicative of the Formalists'

determination to broaden their project by asserting its diversity and capacity to evolve; but it must also be read as a 'farewell' of sorts, particularly when considered alongside Brik's other contributions to that same issue, the collectively authored 'Za chto boretsia Lef' (Aseev, Arvatov, et al 1923) and Brik's own programmatic 'V proizvodstvo' (1923b). The title of this last piece is a play on words, using the phrase that was used to authorise film projects ('into production') to signal an explicitly 'productionist' programme.

⁹ See *Lef*, 1 (1924), pp. 53–139. Relations with Brik's former comrades *po tsekhu* can be gauged by an exchange of letters between Tynianov and Brik on the delicate matter of remuneration: early acknowledgement of the receipt of an advance and a fairly friendly tone give way to angry protestations later in the year, indicating that Brik had failed to send either payment or the relevant issues of the journal, despite repeated and unanswered letters from Tynianov (RGALI 2852/1/272: 1–3). This small example of personally significant financial difficulties is a reminder also that *Lef* ceases publication for reasons that have very little to do with ideology, and everything to do with unprofitability. Tynianov would also publish his seminal article 'O literaturnom fakte' in the second issue of *Lef* (Tynianov 1924). Later it was collected as 'Literaturnyi fakt' in the 1929 collection *Arkhaisty i novatory* (see also Tynianov 1977: 255–70).

¹⁰ 'Ritm i sintaksis' was published serially in *Novyi Lef* in 1927, introduced as individual chapters from a putative book of the same title (Brik 1927).

¹¹ An editorial in *Novyi Lef* towards the end of 1927 declares that '*LEF* continues to cultivate poetry, understood as having an explicitly agitational function, and assigned clear publicistic tasks in coordination with other newspaper material' (Editorial 1927: 1; translated in 'We are searching', Brewster 1971: 67).

¹² This shift is more commonly associated with Brik's 'Tak nazyvaemyi formal'nyi metod' (1923a). See also Enzensberger 1971: 35–58.

¹³ For a detailed account of the development of *literatura fakta*, see Zalambani 2006.

¹⁴ Brik here also dismisses the 'primitive manner of thinking in artistic images', which makes this lineage quite explicit, referencing as it does the foundational Formalist dismissal of Potebnia (see Shklovskii 1919).

¹⁵ See also the somewhat more rudimentary article in which this idea is foreshadowed, 'Fiksatsiia fakta' (Brik 1927c).

¹⁶ It would be tempting on this basis to draw Dziga Vertov's conception of cinema as a 'factory of facts' into the discussion, were it not, as Oksana Bulgakova has pointed out, for the insurmountable fact that 'the intention to create an absolute cine-language and sotsial'nyi zakaz definitely contradict one another' (Bulgakova 1991: 194). Vertov published his 'manifesto' 'Kinoki. Perevorot' in *Lef*, 3 (1923) and remained a figure of – consistently negative – comparison through the *Novyi Lef* period.

¹⁷ This, as if by magic, is the film featured in Vertov's *Chelovek s kinoapparatom/The Man with the Movie Camera* as exemplification of the failure of Soviet cinema to expel bourgeois elements, a failure that will be corrected, for Vertov, in the coming era of the *Kino-glaz*.

¹⁸ This is acknowledged by Tret'iakov himself, who admits that the general line has, to that point, been 'not very evident' [*malo proiavleno*] (Tret'iakov, Shklovskii, Shub 1927: 50; Brewster 1971: 74–80). Bulgakova, although questioning the sustainability of a 'general line', accepts too readily the notion that such a line could only be developed on the basis of 'non-played' [*neigrovaia*] or documentary cinema: Bulgakova 1991: 192. See for comparison Tret'iakov's contention that 'it has never been my view that *Lef* should be concerned with the documentary exclusively' (Tret'iakov, Shklovskii, Shub 1927: 50; Brewster 1971: 74); see also the different approaches to the *igrovaia/neigrovaia* distinction expressed by Tret'iakov,

Shklovskii and Esfir' Shub in the course of the same discussion (more on this latter point below).

¹⁹ This is best illustrated by Shklovskii's remark that Soviet filmmakers unfailingly try to squeeze a love plot even into films about bread: Tret'iakov, Shklovskii, Shub 1927: 57; Brewster 1971: 79.

²⁰ Here Shklovskii proposes an alternative – or parallel – to the distinction he has cultivated in terms of literature, between *siuzhetnaia* and *bessiuzhetnaia* or *vnesiuzhetnaia* prose. This is also the justified occasion for Hansen-Löve's characterisation of Shklovskii's intervention as a 'regression, from the methodological point of view': Khanzen-Love 2001: 490–91.

²¹ 'The idea that in the beginning there is *fabula*, which is then developed in the material, is utterly ridiculous': Tret'iakov, Shklovskii, Shub 1927: 56; Brewster 1971: 78.

²² Valerie Pozner maintains in relation to Brik the core principle that a *kino fakta* ultimately implies the subjugation of all other elements to the pre-eminence of the material, but at the same time presents an overly homogeneous picture of the theoretical relationship between Brik and Shklovskii on the cinema. This is based on their shared antipathy to 'commercial' cinema, their interest in non-played films, their admiration for Esfir' Shub, and their predilection for satire, burlesque and eccentricism, which is far too general, and invites the response that it would have been difficult to find any member of the left avant-garde involved in cinema who *did not* share these broad positions. The conclusion that their disagreement over Eisenstein's *Oktiabr'/October* in 1928 therefore represents a 'sudden polarization' is not supported by examination of Brik's *theoretical* writings in 1927 and 1928, which, although they broadly accept Shklovskii's propositions in relation to the *siuzhetnaia-bessiuzhetnaia* distinction (perhaps without fully appreciating the levels of personal investment implied), are far more radically committed to the principles of factography than Shklovskii ever was; on the *siuzhetnaia-bessiuzhetnaia* distinction, see in particular Brik 1927c. Nor is this line of argument supported by an examination of their respective film output, in which area, as we have suggested from the outset, Brik produced nothing to match Shklovskii's prodigious successes, before or after 1928; see Pozner 2010: 394–401.

²³ This is valid even despite Brik's apparent agreement with Shklovskii in the 'Lef i kino' discussion regarding the 'deformation' of material; we will return to this important point in the conclusion.

²⁴ 'Bom-tara-bom / What a strange picture / Viktor Shklovskii from Sovkino / has ended up at Mezhrabpom / In a word, believe it or not / You won't hold back your shriek: / "What used to be the 'Third Factory' / Will become the factory of Brik"' (Argo 1927: 4).

²⁵ The precise date on which Brik assumed the post is not clear, but, given the exclusive nature of the contract, it must have been after 6 August 1927, when he signed a contract to produce a script for *Kleopatra* for Goskinprom Gruzii (RGALI 2852/1/322: 1), and before 31 December 1927, when a signed declaration by Brik confirms that he is already Head of the Script Department (RGALI 2852/1/324: 1).

²⁶ It should be noted in passing, however, that neither of the two unrealised scripts Brik wrote around this time, 'Tri pobega' and 'Kleopatra', provide much circumstantial evidence of a particular writerly ambition spurned; given that these scripts were never realised, the practical 'realities' of film production cannot be invoked in explanation of their divergence from any concept of *kino fakta*. The literary script for 'Kleopatra' is preserved in RGALI 2852/1/58 and was published by Valiuzhenich in *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 2003. The main reason for the shelving of 'Kleopatra' appears to have been Lev Kuleshov's insistence on casting Aleksandra Khokhlova in the lead role, a proposition to which the administration of Mezhrabpom would not agree (p. 96). The same issue of *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* also contains the slightly later 'Prem'era' (1929), which fell victim to the reorganisation of

Mezhrabpom, and, more interesting still, the earlier 'Priklucheniia El'vista' (1923), co-written with Sergei Iutkevich. The latter is a comedy about a member of a prototype Komsomol organisation who travels to Moscow to buy a football, which was not put into production, according to Brik, because Goskino objected that 'Komsomoltsy don't go to Moscow to get footballs, they stay at home and read Marx' (p. 84).

²⁷ Antipova 2010: 416. Antipova is perhaps too willing to extend to Brik (and Shklovskii) a general principle developed in analysis of Eisenstein and Tret'iakov (and, to a lesser extent, Maiakovskii), but this does not detract from the central point about the paradox of 'symbolism'. See also Bulgakova 1991.

²⁸ Anke Hennig has pointed out that Brik is not only out of line with the broad history of visual art, which would now attribute autonomous status, for example, to the sketch that would once have been regarded merely as preparation for a painting, but is also blind (or deaf) to the unique synthesizing capability of language and verbal art in relation to other art forms. In this – a criticism that appears in sharp contrast to the ritual abuse of Brik and others as 'formalists' throughout the 1930s – he is not inadequately faithful to the material and to factography, but is, paradoxically perhaps, inadequately *formalist*; see Khennig 2010: 402–408.

²⁹ The catalyst for the eventual publication of the story is almost certainly the sound version of the film, which is considerably shorter than Pudovkin's original, and was released in 1949, then again in 1964. It should be acknowledged, however, that there is another version of these events, which insists, without offering any conclusive evidence, that Novokshonov had indeed written a 'novella' [*povest'*] with this title in the late 1920s, and that 'it is difficult to say why the work was not published at that time': see Morolev 1986: 262–63.

³⁰ The review is positive overall, emphasizing the film's agitational power and Pudovkin's directorial strength. This is in stark contrast to the general tone of a highly critical series of editorial interventions relating to Mezhrabpom, including the indicative 'Net Mezhrabpoma, krome Pudovkina' (*Kino*, 11 December, p. 2).

³¹ *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 2 November 1928.

³² See also earlier remarks about Brik's script for 'Prem'era'.

³³ For a recent overview of the rise and fall of Mezhrabpom, which gives a sense of the deteriorating context for these specific events, see Miller 2013.

³⁴ GFF 2/1/207: no page. More damningly, all trace of Brik's involvement is absent from promotional materials, e.g. *Izvestiia*, 25 November 1930, p. 8.

³⁵ *Ia lefovets tol'ko v Lefe; v MRF – ia sluzhashchii*. This, perhaps intentionally, echoes Tret'iakov's earlier complaint that a member of LEF would quite explicitly be recruited to the cinema 'as a specialist, and not as a *Lefovets*' (Tret'iakov 1927: 2 and Brewster 1971: 70). It is also entirely consistent with Brik's insistence at the 'Lef i kino' roundtable that 'We Lefovites want to take responsibility for everything that should be done in in the cinema. I personally work at Mezhrabpom and take no such responsibility. Both Shklovskii and I work there in a particular department, in the script department. As far as we are able to exert an influence, we exert an influence' (Tret'iakov, Shklovskii, Shub 1927: 69); this section does not appear in the truncated English translation in *Screen*.

³⁶ It is almost as tempting to conclude the tale of *2-Bul'di-2* with Brik's equally ambivalent remark that 'it is difficult to make a Soviet comedy, because it's not clear what to laugh at' [*Sovetskuiu komeduiu delat' trudno, potomu chto neizvestno, nad chem smeiat'sia*]: 'Na podstupakh k sovetskoi komedii. Anketa', *Kino*, 19 April 1927, p. 3.

³⁷ Vasilii Katanian reports the perhaps unlikely view that '[the film] should be shown on every screen, particularly in the [workers'] clubs, for the purpose of developing the viewer in relation to the recovery and development of Soviet cinematography' (Katanian 2002: 85).

Elsewhere, N. Kaufman judges that ‘it is possible to write endlessly about the vulgarity [...] of the bourgeois film, but “Stekliannyi glaz” shows it more actively’ (Kaufman 1928: 9). Brik himself touchingly writes during the film’s production: ‘I’m terribly happy about your work in the cinema. I love you more than anything in the world’ (‘O. M. Brik to L. Iu. Brik, 18 August 1928’, in Valiuzhenich 1993: 106).

³⁸ Compare Brik’s earlier declaration that ‘I am not a politician and am not a member of any party. I therefore do not know if the Bolsheviks’ policies are good or not [...] but a Bolshevik cultural programme is impossible’ (Brik 1918b, cited from Valiuzhenich 1993: 15). Compare also Brik’s efforts at this time to those of Shklovskii, who made a final attempt to resurrect *Opoiiaz* in late 1928–early 1929, before ‘capitulating’ at the end of that year (Galushkin 2000: 136–58). It is notable that Brik was involved in the discussions around the resurrection of *Opoiiaz*, and only embarks on his own project for *REF* when it becomes clear that the former option has exhausted itself. Both endeavours confirm, incidentally, the extent to which the struggle for hegemony in literary and cultural affairs was felt to be still live deep into 1929.

³⁹ Maiakovskii’s death was both a catastrophe and, later, a form of salvation for the Briks. Stalin’s declaration that Maiakovskii ‘was and remains the best, the most talented poet of our Soviet epoch. Indifference to his memory and his works is a crime’ in an editorial published in *Pravda* in late 1935 transformed him into a kind of posthumous protector, in both figurative and literal senses: see ‘Vladimir Maiakovskii’, *Pravda*, 5 December 1935, p. 4. On the other hand, the steady flow of Maiakovskii-related work – which preceded Stalin’s intervention, but inevitably intensified after it, including the 1940 documentary referred to below – prompted Shklovskii’s bitter remark that Brik and Lily were ‘boiling [Maiakovskii] down for glue’ (Chukovskii 1992: 136).

⁴⁰ These were *Osoboe mnenie/A Particular Opinion* (a comedy, 1932), *Evgenii Bazarov* (1932), *Pechorin* (1935), all performed at the ‘Semperanta’ Theatre; and *Belyi pudel/The White Poodle* (1939), based on a story by Kuprin, and performed at the Tsentral’nyi detskii teatr.

⁴¹ A second, less successful production was *Imeniny/Namedays* (1935), also to music by Zhelobinskii, and also produced at MALEGOT. Brik worked on a number of further operatic projects (and a ballet), but none would be staged.

⁴² Zaitsev followed up with a demand that Brik and Leonidov return their advance, accompanied by a threat of court action (RGALI 2852/1/332: 7). This episode in fact follows quickly after Mezhrabpom had declined a proposal to adapt Brik’s opera *Kamarinskii muzhik* for the screen (RGALI 2852/1/332: 6). On the other hand, it should also be noted that Brik and Leonidov were not blameless in respect of the steady deterioration of relations with Mezhrabpom and other studios, failing to deliver contracted scripts for projects entitled ‘Manifest’ (for Mezhrabpom in 1932) and ‘Moonzund’ (for Lenfilm in 1936); see respectively RGALI 2852/1/332: 5–6; and RGALI 2852/1/332: 16, RGALI 2852/1/335: 11. ‘Manifest’ is perhaps the most intriguing of all Brik’s unrealised projects; to be directed by Kuleshov for Mezhrabpom in 1932, it was, in Briks’s own words, a ‘historico-revolutionary film about 1847, about Karl Marx, about the Communist Manifesto, about the revolution of 1848’ (Brik 2006a: 205).

⁴³ See also Brik’s own account, which concludes with the admission (or is it a boast?) that ‘the script was written in the course of shooting, on the basis of a script plan that was conceived and ratified in advance’ (Brik 2006c: 233).

⁴⁴ Zalambani 2006: 31–32; see in particular the unequivocal summary that ‘In essence, the LEF round table was an attempt to prepare a rebuttal of the potential propositions for the seizure of power in the Cinema which were likely to be put forward by the Party’ (p. 31).

⁴⁵ Bulgakova expresses this movement in terms of the ‘reproductive nature’ of cinema first making it correspond to an ‘ideal of “factographic” art’, a *model* for literature, to which a conception of the relationship between material and *fabula drawn from literature* is then secondarily applied (Bulgakova 1991: 179, 182).

⁴⁶ This is perhaps the least surprising source of confusion, given the pre-existing vacillations of various Formalists with regard to the status and nature of material in the *literary* work. As Victor Erlich has pointed out, two conflicting conceptions of material retained currency, namely ‘the subject matter of reality embodied in literature, or its medium, language’. He goes on to say that ‘there was apparently no complete unanimity among the Formalist and near-Formalist spokesmen’ on this point, and that Shklovskii, in particular, ‘paid his due to both rival interpretations; consistency or terminological neatness was not his forte’ (Erlich 1980: 189). See also Renfrew 2006: 21–44.

⁴⁷ Shklovskii 1985: 32. Shklovskii’s criticism of Tret’iakov ironically echoes Pavel Medvedev’s later derision of the early Formalist tendency to treat *fabula* as material ‘since all this does not exist as a given outside the work’ (Medvedev 1928: 112; Medvedev/Bakhtin 1978: 153).

⁴⁸ Ultimately, Shklovskii is unable to break from a conception of cinema, or art in general, as essentially symbolic. Brik, too, although he is initially more radically committed to a non-symbolic conception of art – decrying Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*, for example, as ‘ideographic symbolism’ [*ideograficheskaia simvolika*] (Brik, Pertsov, Shklovskii 1928: 33; Brewster 1971: 88) – will later, as we have seen, revert to type in his adjudication of different visual symbols of the revolution in *Storm over Asia*.

⁴⁹ Brik’s close identification with Shklovskii is also consistent with Bulgakova’s conclusion (Bulgakova 1991: 193. The crowning irony of this exchange resides in the fact that it is Tret’iakov, and not the erstwhile Formalists Brik and Shklovskii, who, in the last words of the roundtable discussion, continues to defend his theory of ‘deformation’ by arguing that ‘the laying bare of the device, the laying bare of the “cuisine” of cine-“creativity”, is the primary obligation of LEF’ (Tret’iakov 1927: 70).

⁵⁰ This is consistent with Pozner’s conclusion (Pozner 2010).

⁵¹ This is clearly understood by Boris Arvatov, who, although he had been in a psychiatric hospital since 1923 and was therefore unable to attend the LEF roundtable on cinema in person, submitted a written response that was published in the journal in 1928. Here Arvatov opposes the ‘sociologization’ of art to its ‘destruction’, ‘as certain comrades imagine’ (Arvatov 1928: 37). Contrary to expectations, Brik continued to speak the language of ‘formalism’, albeit in less militant register, as late as 1934, arguing that the *fabula* of documentary cinema is nothing less than ‘the *fabula* of real life’ in an intervention that echoes many of the terms of a then ‘closed’ debate (Brik 2006b: 212).

⁵² Arvatov espouses a principled ‘sociologization’ of the cinema, in contradistinction to its dominant ‘aestheticization’, which is intended to expose the vacillations of LEF and challenge it to pursue the logic of its own programme in education and propaganda as much as in production. He is therefore both consistent with Brik, but also exposes the polemical and perhaps even utopian tendencies in the latter’s thinking.

⁵³ Brik’s language in relation to the audience is once again alarmingly and revealingly violent: ‘We should rout [*razgromit*] the public who pay money [to see Protazanov’s *Chelovek iz restorana/The Man from the Restaurant*, 1927]’ (Tret’iakov 1927: 64).

⁵⁴ Tret’iakov 1927: 64. Even Shklovskii, albeit in characteristically ironic terms, voices this sentiment, claiming that ‘Glavrepertkom [...] is our most cultured organisation, that is, a cultural film that responded to the tasks of Glavrepertkom would also be Lefovite’; Tret’iakov 1927b: 58.

⁵⁵ There is undoubtedly, however, a clearer sense of pragmatism in the contributions of those beyond Brik and Arvatov: Zhemchuzhnyi, for example, emphasizes the importance of ‘the ability to manoeuvre’ (Tret’iakov 1927: 61), while Viktor Pertsov cautions that ‘if we don’t provide an entirely concrete formulation [on the type of film production LEF supported] we will be ignored by the Party Conference’ (Tret’iakov 1927: 69).